

# PREFACE

“The Believer’s Paradox” is part of the following series:

1) **The Believer’s Paradox**

*Recognizing the struggle within us to love, follow, and serve Christ.*

2) **The Five Enemies**

*Identifying the major opposition to loving, following, and serving Christ.*

- **The Self life: The Hindrance to the Spiritual Life (A Murray)**

*“Am I a carnal Christian?” and “Is it possible to live as God intends us to?”*

3) **Putting On & Putting Off**

*Living out the process of transformation.*

- **Ground Zero (TA Sparks)**

*The beginning point of our salvation.*

- **Carnal Versus Spiritual: Denying the Self (A Murray; ctr)**

*Four marks of the carnal life & four steps to victory.*

- **Failure Versus Victory (TA Sparks)**

*Excerpts from the “Victorious Life”*

- **The Principal of the First (1 Corinthians 15:45; Hebrews 10:25)**

*Practical application. The context of Not forsaking the assembling together.*

4) **God’s Economy - Relationships in the Household**

*Practically learning how to put on the virtues of Christ.*

- **Things Which Cannot Be Shaken (TA Sparks)**

*The Nature of the Church.*

- **The Education of Children (Menno Simons, 1557 A.D.)**

*The chief and principal care of the saints.*

#### **5) Today, If You Hear My Voice**

*Believers are called to a life of obedience to Christ.*

#### **6) Patterns to the Flock**

*Qualifications of Leadership.*

None of the specific articles are meant to cover all aspects of our life in Christ, but each has a particular focus.

## **PURPOSE**

“The Believer’s Paradox” is the first in a series of articles intended to address our living and expressing Christ in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation (Philippians 2:15). The purpose is to help believers recognize the paradox related to (1) the struggle within us to love, follow, and serve Christ, and (2) our part in that struggle. As believers we should be constantly battling against sin, the world, Satan, our flesh, our natural mentality, and our self life after we have been regenerated with God’s life. This is why there are so many warnings, admonitions, and even rebukes in the New Testament commanding us to completely eradicate sin, rebellion, and disobedience from our lives. God in Christ accomplished our redemption and initial justification from sin by His death on the cross. However, we cannot sit passively by expecting God to accomplish our full salvation, transformation, and conformation to Christ without our cooperation. We must actively participate with God in order to be holy and righteous as God is holy and righteous. This article addresses the need for us to recognize that negative things still exist within us and outside of us, hindering our pursuit of Christ, and to discern how to fully participate and cooperate with God to accomplish His full salvation.

### Sin Still Exists After Regeneration

Believers must recognize the paradox related to our dealing with sin and unrighteous and unholy thoughts and behavior. Unfortunately, some believers have inadvertently or intentionally justified sin, rebellion, and disobedience to the Lord in their lives. For instance, some take the stand, "Christ has accomplished all on the cross, I am justified and made righteous in God's sight, therefore, I do not need to do anything." So, they ignore the sin and disobedience in their lives, thinking God has removed it or somehow does not care. Others refuse to deal with the consequences of their sin and only superficially deal with it. They say, "I am forgiven and that's the end of all my sin; so I do not have to deal with any sins past, present or future." If that is true, then why does every New Testament book include the matter of "repentance," the command to soberly and severely deal with our sin (Titus 2:12; Ephesians 4:31; 1 Peter 2:1) and disobedience to God and to others (Hebrews 3:12-13; 4:10-11), and the warnings of judgment if we do not obey and deal with these things (Galatians 5:19-21; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:12)? Still other believers only deal partially with their sin. For instance, they may realize that they sinned, so they quickly apologize for a sin or a trespass against another person, but they follow the apology with a reason for their poor action. They say, "I'm sorry, but ...", making their apology self centered and not fully based on the Lord's light. They are not willing to allow God's light to pierce, divide, and judge even to the extent of leaving us naked and laid bare before Him to Whom we are to give an account (Hebrews 4:12-13). Or, similarly, they may have a casual attitude toward sin, admitting that they sin, but without the conviction of its severity (2 Corinthians 7:10).

### Working Out Our Salvation

Another major dilemma (paradox) for believers is our role in salvation. Philippians 2:12-13, "**So then, my beloved, ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who operates in you both the willing and the working for His good pleasure.**" According to these verses, both God and believers play a significant role in salvation. Christ's redemption of the world, the Spirit's sanctification, and the Father's regeneration of us by His life are wholly on God's side. However, every believer has their responsibility in order to receive "**the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls**" (1 Peter 1:9) and that responsibility is obedience, faith, and hope (1 Peter 1:21-22).

Much of this paradox and confusion relates to the matter of doing good works. "**For by grace we have been saved through faith, and this not of ourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works that no one should boast**" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Compare that verse with, "**Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in the heavens**" (Matthew 5:16). James boldly stated, "**So, also faith, if it does not have works, is dead in itself. But someone will say, You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works**" (James 2:17-18). "*We can never be saved by our own good works, but without working we can never be saved. ... We must not do good works to be seen by men, yet we must do good works that are seen by men.*" [Barnes] Can you see the paradox?

### ***Producing Good Works Acceptable to God***

Throughout the Bible, God commands us to do good works (Matthew 5:16; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 10:24; James 2:18; 1 Peter 2:12), yet there are works we do that are not acceptable to God (Matthew 7:22; John 8:41; Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:5; Ephesians 2:9; 2 Timothy 1:9). We must recognize and understand the paradox within us so we can produce the “good works” that God desires and accepts. Our part is to “**not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good, and well pleasing and perfect**” (Romans 12:2). The good works which God accepts issue out of faith, hope, and obedience in the Spirit. Peter said, “**Through Him [Christ] we believe into God, ... so that our faith and hope are in God. Since you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth**” (1 Peter 1:21-22). Some translations add the phrase “in the Spirit” after ‘your obedience to the truth.’ It is not according to or by our self effort that we obey or do good works, but as a manifestation of the Spirit’s work within us.

An example of obedience that yields the good works of God is when Israel had God's empowerment to drive out and destroy the inhabitants of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 31:3; Joshua 3:10). Once Israel entered the good land, there was no such thing as driving out or destroying the enemy in their own self-effort, or apart from God's empowerment. Their example is a picture of what we experience as Christians once we come into faith in Christ. We are empowered by God to live the Christian life and there is no way we can then proceed to live it by our own effort as if we can push God's empowerment aside. Joshua 23:12-13 shows how Israel's responsibility was to have faith and hope in God which they proved by their obedience to Him. They needed to obey God firstly in a positive way by being “**very careful to love the Lord their God**” (Joshua 23:11), and then on the negative side, “**not going back to cleave to what they had learned from the nations, nor to intermarry with them**” (23:12). Mingling with the nations caused them to compromise their faith so that their hope was set in things other than God Himself. Their disobedience resulted in, “**God no longer driving out the nations, but allowing the nations to become a snare and a trap to Israel**” (23:13).

### **Sacrifice & Obedience**

The only good works that God accepts issue from a heart of faith in obedience to God's word (Hebrews 11:6). People can easily be confused by the paradox of sacrifice and obedience. Any healthy person has an inner drive to do good. The problem is that once we are redeemed and regenerated, we need to die to our self life doing the good, and allow the regenerated new soul within us to operate to produce good. 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 shows that the love of Christ is the motivating factor for our good works, but it comes through death and resurrection. This means our soul life and self must be continually put to death so that “**we no longer live to ourselves, but to Him who died and was raised.**” The verses go on to say that we know no one, not even Christ, according to the flesh any longer because the flesh has been put to death. Then, we live as a new creation with old things having passed away and all things having become new. Nothing of our flesh, self, natural life, the world or Satan is part of this new creation.

Another example pictured for us in the Old Testament: **“To obey is better than sacrifice,”** (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul, the first king of Israel, was told by the prophet Samuel that obedience is more important than sacrifice. Saul took it upon himself to offer sacrifices to God without God's commandment or leading. Samuel was sent by God to expose Saul and rebuke him. Yet, we are often told to sacrifice for the Lord. Hebrews 13:15, **“Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.”** 1 Peter 2:5, **“offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** Hebrews 13:16, **“But do not forget doing good and sharing with others, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”** The important matter is the source of our sacrifice. God only accepts sacrifice when it is out of obedience to Him. If we initiate the sacrifice apart from the Lord's leading, then it is in vain.

Believers get caught in the trap of doing things for the Lord (sacrificing), but skipping the obedience according to the Spirit aspect. Martha sacrificed for the Lord to serve Him, but she missed the Lord Himself as recorded in Luke 10:40-42. **“Martha was being drawn about with much serving ... Martha, Martha, you are anxious about many things, but there is need of one thing, for Mary has chosen the good part.”** The one thing is to hear the Lord's speaking and obey Him according to His Spirit. The saints in the church in Ephesus made many sacrifices of themselves without the obedience of faith: **“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance ... You have forsaken the love you had at first ... remember where you have fallen from and repent”** (Revelation 2:1-7).

1 Corinthians 13 gives a list of sacrifices to the Lord that are of no profit and even considered as nothing to the Lord. Speaking in tongues, having the gift of prophecy, knowing all mysteries, having all faith to move a mountain, giving all of our possessions to feed the poor, and delivering up our bodies to be burned at the stake. Aren't these all biblical ways to serve the Lord? Without the love of Christ initiating and filling these “sacrifices” along with the empowering of the Holy Spirit they are of no value to the Lord. This is similarly expressed in Matthew 7:21-23. **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”** These believers did wonderful things for the Lord, but He rejected them because it was not out of obedience to Him nor according to the Spirit's operation, but according to their self life. Again, the source of our sacrifice must be obedience as 1 Peter 1:22 points out: **“Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.”**

### *Discerning Paradox*

We must discern the many paradoxes that exist in our lives once we believe in Christ.

### *Good Works*

God commands good works from us, but these are accomplished in faith by obedience to God with the Spirit's enabling power, not our own ability or understanding. So, we should seek the Lord's enlightenment related to: 1) our attitude towards God, and 2) our motive, intention, or goal for doing good works. Our attitude related to good works begins out of humility (Philippians 2:5-12; 1 Peter 5:6) so we would obey God versus having pride in our own accomplishments or in establishing our own righteousness (Philippians 3:9). Our goal in doing good works is that they would issue forth out of a life that is unto the praise, glory, and honor of God (1 Peter 1:7) versus unto self-exaltation or self-enrichment. Good works in God requires that we empty ourselves of all we are, all we have, and all we have done and can do (Philippians 2:5-7; Matthew 5:3). God then gives us grace (His life) to accomplish what He has asked us to do through His willing and His working (Philippians 2:12-13). Good works in self do not pass through death and resurrection.

### *Fearing God Versus 'Do Not Fear'*

There are many seeming contradictions in God's written word, but they are not contradictions at all if we understand the various paradoxes that exist. For instance, "**The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again**" (Romans 8:15) mentions that we do not need to fear. 1 John 4:18 says that "**Perfect love casts out all fear.**" However, Hebrews 4:1 commands us to fear: "**Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear, so that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.**" 1 Peter 1:17 tells us to "**live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.**" The Old Testament has many citations of "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom**" (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalms 110:10). When we live in the new creation, we will not fear the old creation, but have a proper fear (reverential trust) of our awesome and wonderful God.

### *Foreigners & Strangers Versus Citizens*

Ephesians 2:18 says, "**you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.**" God's kingdom is unshakable (Hebrews 12:28) and gives us a boldness to live for Christ in an evil world.. Yet, 1 Peter 2:11, "**I urge you, as foreigners and exiles (strangers), to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.**" The paradox divides the old creation from the new. We are no longer foreigners and strangers in the new creation, God's kingdom. However, our new citizenship (Philippians 3:21) is in the heavens so we become foreigners and strangers in the old creation earth. What once was comfortable, stable, secure on earth becomes unknown, unsettled, and shaken because we now are learning to live a heavenly existence on the earth. The old creation is shakable and God shakes it all the time (Hebrews 12:25-29) to sift out and discern between what is of God and what is of the old creation. We must be careful not to murmur and reason in our trials, our sufferings, our persecutions and our adversities because these are all agents of God's shaking. When the Lord spoke of us "**Hearing the word and doing it**" he discerned between the house on the rock versus the house on the sand. He also distinguished who is wise and who is foolish.

He did this through agents of testing: the rain, the rivers, and the wind which “beat against” the built house (Matthew 7:24-28). God always shakes, beats, or tests our lives to prove what is of Him and what is not (1 Peter 1:7).

### *Law of Sin & Death Versus the Law of the Spirit of Life*

Romans 7:25 is greatly misunderstood among Christians because they argue whether the Apostle Paul was writing to regenerated believers or unregenerate people. “**Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.**” According to truth, Paul is stating that he himself has two natures battling within, one seeks God through Jesus Christ while the other exists in his flesh, making him a slave of sin. The paradox is important because we have a choice (once God shines in our hearts - 2 Corinthians 4:6) which nature that we will allow to live. We have a choice to set our mind on the Spirit and receive life and peace or by default keep our mind set on the flesh which is death (Romans 8:6). Our life as believers is a moment by moment choice to serve God or to serve mammon, self, flesh, the world, natural relationships, etc. (Matthew 6:24; Galatians 5:13-15; 1 Peter 2:16).

### **Fight the Good Fight**

Peter tells us to “**gird up the loins of our minds and be sober**” (1 Peter 1:13) and “**arm yourselves with the mind [to suffer]**” (1 Peter 4:1), meaning that we must prepare for suffering, for trials, for opposition, and for battle against God's enemies which exist within us and outside of us. All too often, believers (especially in America) attempt to avoid or remove suffering from their lives that God Himself has arranged in order to gain our heart for Him, to produce endurance and perseverance within us, and to glorify Himself. Our part is to gird up our minds and prepare for warfare. Some avoid the warfare because they do not like confrontation, “rocking the boat,” or stirring up trouble, so they will not speak the truth in love to those God has placed them with or they will not listen to others who need to speak the truth in love to them. Some resist their responsibility regarding God's dealing with their weaknesses and sins, insisting that “this is just the way I am.” Others claim that God is always positive and that dealing with sin, etc. makes them feel condemned and defeated. Let's stop ignoring the paradox and justifying our inadequacies before the Lord. We need to “**fight the good fight**” based on “**fleeing the [negative] things and pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and meekness**” (1 Timothy 6:11-12). We need to “**put on the whole armour of God ... for we wrestle not against blood and flesh**” (Ephesians 6:11-12) Within our daily spiritual warfare, God has His role and we have ours that we carry out by His grace.

There are many sober warnings in the Bible for those who disobey God and live in ignorance or rebellion towards Him. We need to be clear that God commands us to obey Him at all costs, and to cooperate with Him to do our part in salvation. We cannot avoid or ignore the paradox:

**Behold then the kindness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but on you, the kindness of God, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.** Romans 11:22

God's intention is to have us fully transformed and conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29; 12:2). Therefore, He will thoroughly expose our sin, disobedience, rebellion, etc. (Hebrews 4:12-13), but we must cooperate with Him so He can deal with our sin, disobedience, rebellion, etc. He enlightens us, and we repent and confess to Him and others (1 John 1:5-2:2; Ephesians 5:8-14). He comes as the High Priest to minister His life into us, and we receive mercy and find His grace to be constituted with the appropriate thinking or behavior God desires (Hebrews 4:14-16).

## An Honest Appraisal

**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. Now then it is no longer I that work it out, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells; for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.** Romans 7:15-18

When I read Romans 7 I feel like the apostle Paul is speaking directly to me. Many argue that these verses relate to our condition prior to salvation, but I have to say that it applies to me today as well. Many then will argue that I am an unhealthy, misguided believer in Christ (if a believer at all). All that I can do is "**speak the truth in love**" (Ephesians 4:15, 25) and hope that some understand my perspective and will seek the Lord more because of my words. There is a paradox operating within me on several levels. One level is that I am saved and possess the life of Christ, but I still struggle with sin. Another level is based on what role I take in this struggle.

### *I Desire to Do Good*

Let me give some examples from my experience showing that Paul's words in Romans 7 apply to me, first from the angle of God commanding me to do something positive ("**For what I want to do I do not do**"). God speaks to me often (daily) and often I either do not obey or only partially obey. The Lord will tell me to nurture my son, but I lose patience and may yell at him. The Lord will encourage me to call a person, but I'm not sure what to say so I may not. The Lord has a brother call me, but I am occupied and may not respond. The Lord speaks that I should attend a gathering, but it requires travel and expenses so I may excuse my way out. The Lord directs me to spend time with Him, but my busy schedule or lack of hunger for the God's living Word hinders the way. The Lord tells me to nourish and cherish my wife, but when she doesn't "comply" I may be rude and try to lord over her. God desires me to humble myself, but sometimes I am too proud to accept being lower than others whom I deem less qualified or capable than I. The Lord wants me to minister to saints who reject my message or will insult me,

and sometimes I am bitter towards their rejection of me. (This also exposes my pride in not wanting to be humble towards them.)

### ***I Cannot Carry Out My Good Desires***

Many things the Lord tells me not to do (“**What I hate I do.**”). I sometimes display outbursts of anger even after the Lord tells me not to speak or react to a situation. In Christ I should always have joy, contentment and peace, but I often feel depressed or discouraged. When I am depressed or discouraged I may eat too much at meals, and then eat snacks without much restriction even when the Lord tells me to stop. The Lord wants me to read His written word with my wife and children, but I’m exhausted and drained from my day so we may not read. The Lord prompts me to exercise rather than watch TV, but my couch is sometimes too comfortable. The Bible denounces lust, idolatry, malice, bitterness, and many other negative matters, but I may continue to yield to lust, fleshly passions or appetites. When I hear people talk about making a lot of money, or going on an extravagant vacation, envy sometimes arises within me. I genuinely love certain brothers and want to see them follow Christ, but sometimes I get sidetracked with jealousy and envy because they have a lot of money and seem to make decisions without any restriction.

### ***Faith and Persecution***

I haven’t even mentioned the most important aspects of our life in Christ which expose me. First, do I live by faith and trust God for my future? Over a period of three years I had to change jobs 5 times because of the Lord’s arrangement. I honestly do not know what my future holds. Due to complications with two different states in America, my 27 years of teaching will not produce sufficient income to retire. This causes much anxiety, frustration, and even bitterness. Secondly, I have lived much of my life with the ability to decrease my suffering. Now that suffering is upon me I am full of fear and easily get discouraged or depressed. I cringe when I consider the possibility of being persecuted for my faith. Do I preach the gospel to everyone I meet? Do I speak honestly about issues involving God’s righteousness and holiness? I have to admit that many times I have kept quiet rather than face the opposition towards my speaking the truth in love.

### ***Light Exposes Darkness***

The good news is that I feel condemned within when I am disobedient to the Lord. I say “amen” to the fact that “**sin dwells in me**” and that “**in my flesh nothing good dwells.**” Part of my being is feeling guilty and hopeless at my inability to follow Christ out of a pure heart. When I read, “**Be holy as I am Holy,**” I shutter. However, on the other hand, I also realize that I do hunger for the Lord, desire His will in my life, seek to speak Christ to others, and repent/confess for my disobediences, and this shows that there must be light from the Lord piercing my hard heart and exposing my darkness (deficiencies and sin). Otherwise, why do I have the desire to love, seek and follow Christ if I am an “unbeliever” who does not care?

What should we do when the Lord exposes so many negative things? We should not ignore the light the Lord is showering on us, nor excuse our inappropriate behavior or thoughts, but rather deal with these negative things in the light of Christ and in His blood. 1 John 1:9, **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** John understood the paradox that exists and he articulated the remedy. Every sin that the Lord exposes must be confessed (our part) and then the Lord will forgive us and cleanse us. This does not contradict Christ's eternal redemption accomplished on the cross, but practically drives us to transformation and conformation (Romans 8:29; 12:2). If we do not repent and confess our sins daily, neither will the Lord forgive and cleanse those sins, meaning that we will not grow spiritually or be transformed or conformed to the image of Christ any further. When sin and offences exist within our being, we can no longer commend ourselves to every conscience of men before God (2 Corinthians 4:2) because our living and our words conflict. Consider Matthew 6:14-15, **“For if you forgive men their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you also; but if you do not forgive men their offenses, neither will your Father forgive your offenses.”** Forgiveness is the basis of God's full salvation. We may mistakenly feel that “all is forgiven” just because we choose to believe that for ourselves. God is not so cheap. Forgiving others is a critical aspect of transformation and conformation.

## Paradox Exists in Believers

A paradox is something that is made up of two opposite things, which seem impossible to put together, but is actually true or possible. In particular, a genuine believer in Jesus Christ is someone who possesses two things that are opposite each other, which creates a seeming contradiction within them and in their actions. Consider this quote as a good example of a believer's paradox:

*“The degree of hopelessness we feel determines the amount of hope we experience in Christ.”* (Barnes New Testament Notes based on 1 Peter 2:7a; Romans 4:18)

At times I have such a strong desire to follow Christ, but at other times I feel absolutely hopeless to follow Christ because of failures, weaknesses, defects, limitations, etc.. Yet something within me tells me at that moment, “now you are ready to follow me.” 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 speaks to me about this, **“Out of darkness, light shall shine ... We have this treasure (Christ) in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not out of us.”** I can feel the darkness in my being and I can also sense the light operating. Every day I battle with this paradox: I have Christ living within me, and desire to seek and follow Him because He is drawing me to Himself (John 6:44), but at the same time, I have an earthen vessel (filled with the flesh, self, natural man, the world and even Satan's influence) that is prone to falling away and disappointing Him. As a believer I am commanded to no longer sin (1 John 3:9), but in reality I would be lying if I did not admit that there is **“evil present with me, even a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind (in Christ), trying to make me a captive to the law of sin which is in my members.”** (Romans 7:21-24)

I also struggle with my responsibility in dealing with the sin that the Lord exposes. Paul said that we need to, **“Overthrow reasonings and every high thing rising up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ.”** How many thoughts do we have in one day? God demands that every thought be taken captive, meaning we need 100% fellowship with Him 100% of the time! I’ve heard many saints say that this is impossible ... do they see the paradox? I do. I have many reasonings and high things in my mind that war against the knowledge of God, and at the same time I am learning to bring these to Christ and He is giving me the willingness and ability to take captive every thought ... one at a time. (This realization proves that not every thought is already taken captive.)

God uses our fallen faculties to gain our attention, in this case: hopelessness. If we pursue God with all of our heart, mind and soul, we will quickly realize that anything other than God is hopeless. Only Christ in us is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). Our flesh, our self effort, our natural understanding, the world’s influence in our lives, and Satan all bring hopelessness in terms of loving and following Christ. Actually, it is a blessing for believers to recognize their hopelessness apart from Christ. When the Lord spoke of His disciples bearing fruit, He made it clear: **“For apart from Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5). To recognize this paradox is half the battle, and then to cooperate with the Lord to deal with it is the other half.

### **Humbling Ourselves**

Consider the story of the Prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. The younger son demanded his share of his inheritance from his father and then went to a distant country and squandered it in riotous living. A famine occurred and this once presumptuous and self assured young man was broken to the point of desiring to eat the slop thrown to pigs. It took such a destitute condition for the proud young man to come to his senses and realize that even his father’s servants lived so much better than he did. As he considered his poor decisions of the past, he came to a humbling repentance, **“I have sinned against heaven and before you (my father). I am no longer worthy to be called your son”** (Luke 15:17) Isn’t this the same as becoming hopeless? **“I am no longer worthy”** implies that the son at one time was arrogant, presuming his worthiness before the father, so he callously took his inheritance and wasted it on sinful pleasure. Now, through suffering, he was shown his true condition: his dishonor towards God and his father, his weak disposition to so easily give up the best life that he had done nothing to earn, and his foolishness based on pride. Then, he rose up and went back home to his father and spoke the same repentance that he had spoken to God. (Sometimes, we forget that God is not the only one whom we have offended and that we must repent to people as well as to God. [Matthew 5:23-24]) No sooner had he repented to his father, that there was an immediate restoring of the family relationship and honor that the son had so foolishly discarded years earlier.

We may question suffering in our lives and we may question God’s willingness to forgive others who lived such an evil, sinful life. Jonah had initially refused to preach the gospel to Nineveh for that very reason. **“For I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great loving kindness, and repent of the evil you allow people to endure for their sin”** (Jonah 4:2). Actually, God will not repent of His harsh judgment on sin until we repent and

confess to Him. He will allow suffering to bring us to the point of realizing our unworthiness and hopelessness before Him. Then, He will “repent” and forgive our sins. The father in the story of the Prodigal son was a picture of God the Father dealing with sinners and he lavished gifts upon his son and restored his honor after he had repented and confessed because the son had truly realized his utter sinfulness and unworthiness, his hopelessness. This is what qualifies us to be loved by God and serve Him: we are enlightened (usually in the midst of suffering) and we see our unworthiness and hopelessness before God. Then, He will restore us to Himself and prepare us to serve Him.

### Too Negative Or Walking by Faith?

I have had many saints tell me that I am too hard on myself when I repent and confess to them of weaknesses, failures, and disobedience to the Lord. They have even gone as far as to say, “you make it sound so hopeless” with the implication that once we believe in Christ our life should be nothing but full of hope, encouraging things, and victory. Others tell me that they do not even attempt to follow the Lord the way I do, being content to stay “in the dark.” It is not like I do not want the positive things of Christ to completely fill me, but I also recognize my lack, my weaknesses, my rebellion, my bitterness, and much more that prevents me from yielding to Christ absolutely. When I read God’s word, I see the paradox: “**Who (Abraham) beyond hope, believed in hope.**” (Romans 4:18) God called Abraham, but at certain points, Abraham found it absolutely hopeless to follow God especially when God told him that he would be a father of nations. He did not have a son and his wife had already gone through menopause, so the situation was literally hopeless in the flesh. Yet, that is when God began the work of imparting life into Sarah and Abraham. Do you see the paradox? If you look closely at Abraham’s life, he failed time and time again despite God’s revelation and speaking to him. He took Hagar and had Ishmael. He went to Egypt rather than the good land and lied about Sarah being his sister, etc. Yet, we are exhorted to “**walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham**” (Romans 4:12).

## Recognizing the Paradox

I believe that to pursue Christ, we must recognize the paradox within us and then do our part to resolve it. Otherwise, why would we be commanded to “**examine ourselves**” (1 Corinthians 11:27) prior to partaking of the Lord’s table? Why would the Lord tell us to “**Leave your gift before the altar, and first go and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift**” (Matthew 5:24). Why would Paul tell us to bear one another’s burdens in the context of “**if a man is overtaken in some offense, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, looking to yourself lest you also be tempted?**” Here we see a paradox that a believer can be overtaken in some offense and even those who are sent to restore them must be careful due to the possibility of lording over the weaker ones and due to temptation. As believers we must realize that possibility of sin and deal with it: Hebrews is full of warnings to believers not to “**harden our hearts**” (3:7), “**fall away from the living God**” (3:12), “**have an evil heart of unbelief**” (3:13), or “**shrink back**” (10:39).

1 Peter 2:1, “**Putting off all malice, all guile, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking**”. “Putting off” implies a continual process, not once-for-all. Paul wrote to Timothy to tell the believers to cleanse themselves from dishonorable things, flee youthful lusts, and avoid foolish questionings (2 Timothy 2:20-23). John warns us to not hate our brothers (1 John 2:10), and tells us to not love the world (1 John 2:15). Paul warns us to “**keep away from every brother walking disorderly and not according to the things which were handed down**” (1 Thessalonians 3:6). If we are “**perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect**” (Matthew 5:48) and “**holy as He is holy**” (1 Peter 2:16), then why do we still need to deal with so many negative things? Can we be ‘ostriches’ who bury our heads in the sand, pretending that we are holy and righteous, when in reality we are loaded down with sin due to disobedience or ignorance? These negative things did not just disappear when we got regenerated. Otherwise Peter and all the other New Testament writers would not have told us to deal with them.

Even when I feel I am obeying and following Christ, I still sense that darkness is operating within me. For instance, the Lord directs me to correct my son in order to raise him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But in the process I am too excessive in my tone, my discipline, or my dealing with the situation. Possibly I show an outburst of anger and excessively deal with him, which exposes my flesh. Does this negate the Lord’s word to me? No, but it makes me aware of the paradox and prompts me to go to the Lord for reconciliation with Him and my son. I pray for many saints who struggle to seek Christ at all and then I find myself envious of their ability to do what they want and bitter because of their rejection of me (not returning calls, emails, texts, etc.). However, I still need to obey the Lord to love them, contact them, or do whatever the Lord tells me to do.

John Wesley wrote, *"But will not all Christians sin some time? This he answers by: I everywhere allow that a child of God can and will commit sin, if he does not keep himself."* [How the Methodists Saved America. p.62 on paper, page 70 digital]. We must see that sin may occur because we are not “keeping ourselves” by obeying the Lord in every thought and action. Once sin is present, we need to deal with that sin in the blood and light of Christ, not just dismiss it or excuse it. James tells us that “**if [we] lack wisdom, [we] should ask of God ... and our asking must be in faith, doubting nothing because those who doubt are driven by the wind and tossed about. This implies we have two distinct modes of living: faith and not faith (doubt) and without faith we can expect to receive nothing from the Lord**”(James 1:5-7). James attributed receiving nothing from God to a person being “**a double-souled man, unstable in all of his ways**” (James 1:8). We have the soul of the self-life (representing the flesh and natural understandings) and the soul driven by the Spirit which is being renewed.

### Peter's Paradox

Let's consider the apostle Peter after the Lord's resurrection. In John 20:22 the Lord, “**breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit.**” Within a short time, Peter, being discouraged, decided to go back to his former profession, fishing, and he took six others with him. Think about this. Jesus had just raised from the dead, and breathed the Holy Spirit into

Peter. Yet, he was still depressed to the point of going fishing. Shouldn't he have been leaping for joy and full of victory? How many times have we seen someone raised from the dead? On one hand, Peter had the Holy Spirit breathed into him, and on the other he was discouraged and he failed.

This was early in Peter's regenerated experience. Now let's jump to Galatians 2:13-14 about 17 years later. By this time Peter was an established apostle, having preached to thousands and seeing thousands saved into Christ (Acts 2:41; 6:7). Yet, another big failure was exposed. The younger apostle Paul told Peter and those with him that "**they were not walking in a straightforward way in relation to the truth of the gospel,**" and he specifically exposed Peter in front of everyone present. Would anyone dare say that Peter was not a genuine believer in Christ despite his deviation from the truth of the gospel? Isn't this why Peter was so heartfelt when he spoke of purifying our souls and admonishes us to put away the negative things within us and pursue Christ as newborn babes? (1 Peter 1:22; 2:2)

Peter acknowledged the battle (paradox) raging within us: "**As strangers and sojourners, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.**" (1 Peter 2:11; 1:9). Peter's epistles are filled with warnings, exhortations, and instructions that we need to follow by God's grace in order to overcome our weaknesses and to defeat the enemies opposing us. He addresses believers as "**children of obedience**" (1 Peter 1:14) and tells us that we are "**purified by our obedience to the truth**" (1 Peter 1:22). We cannot be passive as temptations and evil desires bombard us, but must seek the Lord and then obey His leading.

### **John Points Out the Paradox**

The apostle John wrote His epistles near 90 A.D., and they were the final recorded words in the canonized Bible. 1 John 2:1, "**I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.**" Here John points out the believer's paradox: to have a life "**so that you will not sin,**" yet "**if anyone does sin**". (John was addressing believers because he wrote to them as "little children" of the Father and Jesus Christ.) On one hand, John wrote that believers may not sin. On the other hand, he wrote of the provision (an Advocate) if we do sin. Paul wrote a similar thing in Romans 6:1-2a, "**What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!**" Both Paul and John wrote with the understanding that it is possible for genuine believers in Christ to sin, but the goal of every believer is not to sin based on the grace of Christ within us. It is a paradox we need to understand so we can become victorious in Christ.

### **An Evil Heart of Unbelief Versus an Obedient Heart**

Why do we need to understand this paradox? We need to be aware of the contradicting natures within us that produce contradicting actions. Hebrews 3:7-8, "**Therefore, even as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the provocation, in the day of trial in the wilderness.'**" The author of Hebrews continues this thought a few verses later, "**Beware, brothers, lest perhaps there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief in falling**

**away from the living God. But exhort one another each day, as long as it is called 'today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.**" (Hebrews 3:12-13) These verses show that a believer may have an evil heart of unbelief that falls away from the living God. They also instruct us to exhort one another (fellow believers) due to the possibility of our hearts becoming hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Again, note the negative exposure, and the positive admonition to deal with it.

There is another kind of heart described throughout the word of God. Ezekiel 36:26-27 says, "**And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.**" Matthew 11:28 says, "**I am meek and lowly in heart.**" Matthew 5:3, "**Blessed are the pure in heart.**" Luke 6:45, "**The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good.**" John 7:38, "**Out of his heart (innermost being) will flow rivers of living water.**" Romans 5:5, "**God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**" Romans 6:17, "**You who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.**" Philippians 4:7 says, "**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

What a paradox that a believer can seemingly have two kinds of hearts! And what a contrast: an evil heart of unbelief that is hardened by sin's deceitfulness versus a pure, loving, meek, humble, and obedient heart that is guarded by God and honors God. I recognize both of these aspects operating in me every day. God's solution for us is to allow the living and operative word to pierce us, divide our soul from the spirit, and to judge or discern every thought and intention to the point that we are naked and laid bare before Him. Once we allow the word to operate and expose us completely, then, the Great High Priest (Jesus Christ) comes in to minister to us. Even then, we need to come forward to Him to receive mercy and find grace for timely help. (Hebrews 4:12-16). We cannot just sit passively and do nothing.

### **The Lord's Sober Words**

The Lord spoke many difficult words in the gospel that too many believers misunderstand or rationalize according to their own understanding. This causes them to miss the mark in terms of following Christ especially in dealing with the negative things of our flesh, self-life, natural man, the world, and Satan. For instance, "**Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, was it not in Your name that we prophesied, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name did many works of power? and then I will declare to them: I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.**" (Matthew 7:22-23) Many say that the Lord was not speaking to believers or His followers. Really? I suppose it is conceivable that an unbeliever would prophesy in the Lord's name, cast out demons in His name, and do works of power in His name in order to advance the self. But the context of these verses is not about false believers or false prophets, but about the fruit of our lives (7:15-20) related to our obedience to the Lord's word (7:24-27). Those who hear and obey the Lord's word will build a house that stands the test of adversity. Conversely, those who do not hear and obey the Lord's word will build a house that falls. Isn't the latter house falling another way of the Lord saying, "**I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness**"? Isn't this a way the Lord is warning us that the fruit we have produced is

unacceptable because it is not out of obedience to Him? Even the apostle Paul was afraid of being disapproved by the Lord so he took action: **“I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved.”** (1 Corinthians 9:27)

### **Am I too Much?**

The Lord has specifically told me to open my heart to others. Hence, I am writing articles like this one filled with my own experiences. As you read, some may feel that I am too hard on myself and focus too much on the negative side. They say that Christ died for our sins and everything in Christ is positive. I do not deny the positives, but am touching the reality of the negative side that exists in all of us. We must consider how serious the Lord is about us being perfect and holy as He is, and how far short we are of such a virtuous life. The Lord told us, **“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter the kingdom of the heavens”** (Matthew 5:20). Matthew 5:29-30, **“If your right eye stumbles you, pluck it out and cast it from you. ... If your right hand stumbles you, cut it off and cast it from you.”** To be honest, until recently, I mainly ignored verses like these because I couldn't understand them. The Lord was addressing the negative things on two levels: the lust in our heart and the outward immoral actions produced from our heart. Can any one of us say that we do not have lust in our heart or anger towards another saint/person? The Lord is not superficial in His dealings with us, and is telling us to give no occasion to sin, not even a moment's notice or acknowledgment of any evil passion or sinful appetite.

We need to ask two important questions: 1) Are we as strict with ourselves as the Lord demands in dealing with our flesh, self-life, natural man, the world, and Satan? I have to say unequivocally, “No,” Yet, neither should I justify or excuse my unrighteous and unholy behavior, but quickly turn to the Lord to save me! 2) Are we as strict with ourselves as we are towards others? In other words do I hold myself to the same standard that I expect from others? If I judge another's behavior, have I first judged that behavior in me? **“And just as you want men to do to you, do to them likewise”** (Luke 6:31). Matthew 7:1 says, **“Do not judge, that you be not judged.”** Romans 2:1, **“You are without excuse, O every man who judges, for in what you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.”** When we judge other saints or people, it is likely that we actually have the same sin or inappropriate thoughts or action within ourselves. Therefore, we must deal with that issue before attempting to deal with it in someone else. Matthew 7:5 tells us to **“Remove the beam from our own eye, and then we will see clearly to remove the splinter from our brother's eye.”**

### **The Lord Disciplines Those He Loves (Sons)**

Hebrews 10:26, **“If we sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and fervor of fire, which is to consume the adversaries.”** What a severe warning to us! Yet, many bypass the warning because they feel that the author of Hebrews was not speaking to believers in Christ here. The context of this chapter and the entire book of Hebrews is to believers. However, my point is the severity of God's dealing with our sin. No genuine believer can argue that Hebrews 12:5-14

was written to believers, who are specifically called God's sons: **“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when reproved by Him.”** Doesn't this verse clearly show that we have many issues that do not please the Lord and that He (and we) must deal with? **“For whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges (beats, punishes) every son whom He receives.”** (Hebrews 12:6) If evil things are no longer present after regeneration, then why do we need harsh discipline and beatings from the Lord? **“If you are without discipline, ... then you are illegitimate and not sons.”** (Hebrews 12:8)

So, the status of being a son (or daughter) insures discipline and scourgings from a loving Father because we still disobey, we still rebel, we still murmur, we still choose self over Christ, etc. even as believers. Do we allow the Lord to discipline and beat us or do we excuse ourselves from the process because it seems too hard? Hebrews 12:3 & 11 tell us, **“that you may not grow weary, fainting in your souls,”** and **“no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but grievous, but afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who are exercised by it.”** Again, we cannot sit passively by when the Lord deals with us, but we must be “exercised” by His discipline. God does His part and we must do ours.

## Peeling Back the Layers

Saints, it was not after 47 years of believing that I have been willing not only to admit, but also to allow the Lord to deal with some deeper issues in my life: bitterness, pride, covetousness, envy, and fear. At one point in my life, I had a good paying job, but had also been working to go into administration. I was offered such a job with the understanding that it would be secure for the next five years at least. They lied. I was laid off at the end of the year and left unemployed. To make a long story short, I bounced from job to job for three years and it has caused a major shake up in my life (and my wife's). At first I was so angry with the Lord for seemingly leading me to take such a big risk. Now, I am thankful that He has given me the opportunity to once again live by faith and not by sight.

### *Bitterness*

In the process of seeking, loving and following the Lord, He deals with me as a son. I have discovered that He exposes me daily and His exposing goes deeper as I allow Him to continue. It's like peeling the layers off an onion. I did not realize how many dark layers exist within me. And now because I face the negative things and bring them to Christ, I believe the Lord is able to get to some “roots” so that I can truly be transformed and conformed into His image (Romans 8:29; 12:2). Let me give more examples. First, I'll touch on bitterness. I have blamed God throughout my entire life for sufferings, losses, “slammed doors”, and opposition. I never realized that these are blessings in disguise that help me grow and also promote the Lord's gospel. I have dealt with many brothers who have hurt me over the years. When I try to contact them, they do not respond. When we talk, we are clearly on different wavelengths and their view of me ranges from somewhat to very negative. They often rebuke me and twist my words or simply ignore me. I found a deep-seated bitterness in me for God, and towards brothers. 1 John strongly emphasizes that loving the

brothers is not only a command, but an indication of my spiritual health. I am repenting often for my bitterness, and love is taking its place (gradually).

### ***Sinful Pride***

When I allowed God to expose my bitterness I repented and asked Him to dig deeper (Luke 6:48). He shined further to expose something much worse: my pride. To blame God is to denigrate God as unworthy and unkind. God is good and knows better than we do what we need. We must lift Him up as supreme not only in our own lives but before all people. We must appreciate and trust in His goodness no matter our circumstances. As I blamed God, I realized that I was setting myself up as superior to God, having God serve me rather than me serve Him, and thinking that I know better than He. I repented with many tears! **“But, who are you, O man, to answer back to God” Shall the thing molded say to him who molded it, Why did you make me thus?”** (Romans 9:19). Through the suffering process, I am beginning to understand why God allows trials, afflictions, persecution and opposition in my life. He desires us to be utterly dependent on Him so that we can have a manner of life that is excellent among the unbelieving so that they may also love God (1 Peter 2:12) all the while perfecting me as a son. He is so wise and loving!

Pride is quite far reaching and needs to be exposed over and over. Ask yourself how you feel when the Lord places you in a position under those with much less experience and capability. 1 Peter 5:5b-6 is a nice verse to read, but do we assimilate it into our spiritual being? **“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God that He may lift you up in due time.”** I taught 25 years in public education and several more in the private sector. Yet, the Lord constantly arranged for me to work with young, novice, inexperienced teachers who “know more than I do” and have all kinds of suggestions and “corrections.” Honestly, most are intimidated by me and this makes them uncomfortable so they tend to be impatient, abrupt, and rude towards me all the while thinking that they are right. I want to retaliate or simply tell them that I have more experience and capability than they do, but the Lord exposes my pride and asks, “Will you love them for Me? Will you humble yourself for Me?” God’s work in my life has helped me tremendously in my marriage life and with my children. I honestly did not understand humility in the past, but it is growing in me.

### ***Covetousness***

I am astounded at how covetous I am now that money is tight and there is no guarantee for my future. I desire to buy “this item and that one.” I live among so many affluent people and I am drawn to what they have. Again, I repent daily for my covetous heart and the Lord is helping me touch His gracious provision as sufficient. I am also filled with envy so often when I consider others, especially saints who have more than I do and seem to live freely without much restriction. So many saints store up wealth for retirement, vacations, travel, etc.. Many guard their own schedules, refusing to adjust, while I sacrifice mine to obey the Lord. So many saints make sure they buy what they think they need or want (property, club memberships, equipment, nicer cars, etc.) and I am envious because of my limited means. I repent often for my foolishness, and the

Lord is gradually becoming my sufficient supply in which I am content (1 Timothy 6:6-10). The bottom line is dependence on God or independence to live self.

### ***Fear of Persecution & Opposition***

One more example: I fear persecution and opposition. The thought of losing my present job haunts me daily because I am anxious about making mistakes or being put on the spot and failing. I realize that I am timid when it comes to speaking forth Christ to others when He prompts me to do so. "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me." I consider saints who watch family members die, lose jobs, lose opportunities for a quality education, or lose all security for the sake of Christ ... and they do it willingly with the full assurance that Christ will win one day! I recognize a shortage in my life in this matter. Therefore, I repent and ask the Lord to make me willing not only to love Him, but to speak on His behalf. The fact is, the more I love Him, the more I cannot contain what He has done for me and who He is ... I am compelled to share it ... no matter what the consequences may be. The truth is: we speak out of the abundance of our hearts (Luke 6:45), we speak about the things we hold most dear, we speak about what we love! Ask yourself if you speak about the Lord Jesus every day.

## **Dealing with the Paradox**

**"God is light and in Him is no darkness at all"** (1 John 1:5). There is no paradox with God. He is light without any darkness. He always does His part in righteousness, holiness, and love. But what about us? 1 John 1:7, **"If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all unrighteousness."** John points to the fact that we as believers still have unrighteousness (darkness) within us that must be dealt with by coming into the light and being cleansed in the blood of Jesus. This is why he tells us that we are cleansed from all unrighteousness. Then, 1 John 1:8, **"If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us."** John declares that we still have sin and if we say otherwise, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. It is important to see the paradox within us so we can deal with it.

### **We've Been Warned**

To me one of the strongest, most prevalent themes in the Bible is that God has spoken to us. The question is, "What will we do with His word?" It is certainly a good and needful thing to praise God, live a life full of thanksgiving and gratitude to God, generously give out of all the blessing that God has given to us, and live a life in the gospel to save others. But it is equally as important for us to soberly approach a holy and perfect God on His terms, not ours, and to obey Him at all costs by the Spirit's power, not our own. It seems there are just as many warnings, rebukes, corrections, and admonitions in the Bible as positive, proactive commandments. On one hand, we have been regenerated with the Father's life by the redemption of Jesus Christ through the sanctification of the Spirit unto eternal life. This is all on God's side and it is glorious! Yet, we

still need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We still need to cleanse ourselves and put away all the negative things in the light of Christ.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians believers (1 Corinthians 10:1-13; see also Hebrews 3-4) strongly warning them about the believer's paradox by using Old Testament examples. The Old Testament saints experienced God in miraculous ways: they were baptized unto Moses, they ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink from the spiritual rock that was Christ. Yet all but two of the older generation (approximately 1 million adults) died in the wilderness! They lusted, committed idolatry and fornication, lived for pleasure, murmured against the Lord, and tested Christ. **“Now these things happened to them as an example [to us] and they were written for our admonition.”** Paul included himself in this admonition (“our”). The Old Testament was used as examples for our (believer's) learning and growth in the Lord. When I read 1 Corinthians 10, I honestly feel that I would have been one of those who “fell in the wilderness” based on any aspect of the list mentioned. This drives me to tears, mourning (Matthew 5:4) before the Lord and seeking His face (2 Corinthians 4:6). James tells us to **“Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-souled! Endure misery and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you”** (James 4:8-10). There is no passivity involved here, but an active obedience and pursuing on our part of righteousness after we recognize and deal with the negative things. How often have you mourned your sinful condition with the realization that Christ has given everything that we would be like Him?

We need to be sober before the Lord, seeking His presence, and asking Him **“if there be any wicked way in me”** (Psalms 139:24). 1 Corinthians 10 and the book of Hebrews, warn us that if we do follow the example of the Israelites in the wilderness by being disobedient to God, He will judge us severely (Matthew 7:22-24; Hebrews 12:24-30; 1 Corinthians 3:15, 9:27). **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”** (Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 9:10).

### **Hear His Voice & Obey**

I think Hebrews 3:7 & 13 should be posted on every believer's house, doorway, and forehead (Deuteronomy 11:19-20). **“Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart as in the provocation, in the day of trial in the wilderness”**. I believe the Lord speaks to us every single day all day long. The question is: are we listening and obeying? The Lord said, **“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”** (John 10:27). **“But exhort one another each day, as long as it is called today, lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”** A big part of fellowship among believers should be to exhort one another, teach one another, admonish one another, encourage one another, rebuke one another, and live as role models before one another to hear the Lord's voice and obey (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul told Titus to **“reprove them [the believers] severely that they may be healthy in the faith”** (Titus 1:13).

### **The Word of God is Living and Operative**

Paul said, “**Lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved**” (1 Corinthians 9:27). I would never dare compare my spiritual walk with Paul’s (he was so absolute), and yet he made concession for the possibility of his falling short. So how can you and I live a healthy life in Christ? We need to immerse ourselves in the word of God so we have more opportunity to walk in the light as He is in the light. The more we hunger for the word, the more the word can operate.

Hebrews 4:12 says, “**For the word of God is living and operative and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.**” As we eat and drink the spiritual food of the word of God and allow it to be living and operative within us by the Spirit’s enlivening and empowering, it will pierce us. This implies a hardness of heart (Hebrews 3:8, 13; 4:7). The living and operative word of God will then divide soul (old man) from spirit (new man), and continue to delve to the deepest part of our being, the heart. Our heart contains our thoughts and intentions, and God’s living and operative word “discerns” or “judges” or “exposes” or “sifts” or “analyzes” our thoughts and intentions. Every thought and every intention must experience the light of God’s word! This is the only way that we could “**Take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ**” (2 Corinthians 10:5). The words “pierce”, “divide” and “discern/judge” all indicate that there is a dichotomy of natures, lives, actions, and existence. The old man must be separated from the new man and God’s word is the agent of separation. If we had only the new man without any remnant of the old man, there would be no need of piercing, dividing, and discerning.

Hebrews 4:13 takes the Lord’s “surgery” of our unhealthy parts to a whole new level, “**And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.**” First of all, this is written to believers and it clearly says that we will give an account to Him. What will we be accountable for? The context is verse 4:12 within the context of Hebrews 3 & 4 in which we are to hear and obey the Lord’s word and allow it to operate. We are accountable for every word the Lord speaks to us! What a sobering thought especially if our hearts are hard and we are not even listening! We are still accountable. Second, the analogy here relates to the Old Testament animal sacrifice when the priest prepared the offering to the Lord based on our sin (burnt offering, peace offering, trespass offering, sin offering). The animal had its jugular vein cut, it was skinned, and it was cut into pieces until every part of the animal was exposed or laid bare. Another analogy is an operation in which the surgeon removes the abdominal organs and opens the entire abdominal cavity. Nothing is hidden and all is laid bare. This is the kind of openness that the Lord desires for us and we can have it today ... or it will occur in “that” day when we stand before Him (2 Corinthians 5:10).

## **So Why is Recognizing the Paradox Necessary?**

We as believers in Jesus Christ should be sensing and realizing the paradox within our being throughout each day (“**as long as it is called today**” Hebrews 3:13). The more we love and pursue Christ, the more the paradox becomes apparent, and the deeper the Lord can dig into our being to expose the “roots” (Hebrews 12:15), the source of the darkness, disobedience, and disbelief. We

then take the responsibility in the Lord to deal with the negative things and follow Him in all the positive things He commands.

2 Peter 1:4, **“Through which He has granted to us precious and exceedingly great promises that through these you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption which is in the world by lust.”** How magnificent that we become partakers of the divine nature! The paradox is that there is a spiritual cycle we must actively pursue. While we possess God’s divine nature we must escape the corruption which is in the world by lust. While we receive the precious and exceedingly great promises, we cannot just passively idle in the spiritual life, but must actively participate by coming to the Lord and dealing with all negative things, that means all the sin in our lives, while actively avoiding pitfalls, and adding the divinely human virtues to our lives by our obedience to the truth. Peter continues by exhorting us to **“add all diligence, and to supply bountifully in your faith virtue; and in virtue, knowledge, and in knowledge, self-control; and in self-control, endurance; and in endurance, godliness; and in godliness, brotherly love; and in brotherly love, love”** (2 Peter 1:5-7). Peter clearly points out the paradox in 1:8 between the virtuous life operating in us versus our being idle and unfruitful. We have a choice to make every moment of our lives: to put off the old man (idleness, unfruitfulness, sins, etc.), to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and to put on the new man (divinely human virtues) [Ephesians 4:20-24]. So Peter repeats with emphasis: **“Therefore, brothers (and sisters), be the more diligent to make your calling and selection firm, for doing these things you shall by no means ever stumble”** (2 Peter 1:10). On God’s side, His election is sure, but on our side, we must make that selection firm by responding appropriately to the Lord’s word.

### **Doctrine Versus the Living Word**

Recognizing the paradox within us will cause Christ and His word to become very practical to us and therefore, drive us to constantly walk in the light of the Holy Spirit. This means we will constantly be exposed and need to repent and confess to the Lord. Otherwise, the word of God is simply doctrine and intellectual knowledge which puffs up rather than produces love (1 Corinthians 8:1), and our hearts become hardened (Hebrews 3:7), we become dull of hearing (Hebrews 5:11), and remain immature spiritually (Hebrews 5:12-14). On the contrary, when the word of God becomes living and operative in our being, it pierces, it divides, it judges, and it lays bare every single thought, every single motive and attitude, and every single action. This process exposes all of the negative things within us that oppose God, and allows God to cleanse us and fill us with Himself so we can serve Him in newness of life (Romans 7:6).

### **Apart From Christ We Can Do Nothing**

In the garden of Gethsemane the Lord took Peter, James, and John away to pray on the night of his betrayal and eventual crucifixion. The Lord brought His disciples with Him to pray with Him, but they fell asleep. So He woke them and said, **“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** Now we see the paradox in reverse. In this case the disciples were powerless to stand with the Lord in their flesh even though their spirit

was willing. A huge lesson we learn from the paradox within is that the flesh, the soul life, the natural man, the world and Satan are powerless to obey and follow the Lord Jesus. So when we attempt to obey and follow Christ using any of those aspects in our being we will fail and fall short. The Lord made it clear that **“Apart from Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5b). It is important for us to recognize the paradox within us so we can discern any effort that originates from the flesh, the self, the natural man, the world, and Satan versus the Lord Jesus as the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

### **Weakness Brings Power**

Paul recognized that he could do nothing apart from Christ. In his epistles he denounced each of the five major enemies that operate within us and outside us: the flesh, the self, the natural man, the world, and Satan and his armies. He learned this lesson so clearly and helped us to recognize it for ourselves. For instance, when he faced a “thorn in his side” that was Satan buffeting him, he asked the Lord to remove it on three occasions. The Lord presented an important paradox to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, **“And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you. My power is perfected in weaknesses. Most gladly, therefore, will I rather boast in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may tabernacle over me. I am well pleased, therefore, in weaknesses, in insults, in necessities, in persecutions and distresses on behalf of Christ. For when I am weak then I am strong.”** Paul knew that when his flesh, his soul life, his natural man, the world's influence within him, and Satan were strong, he was powerless to obey and follow the Lord. However, when he was weak and totally dependent on Christ those enemies were put to death through the Spirit's enlightenment and His obedience to the Lord's word, and he became powerful in Christ.

Consider how much repentance and confession is necessary in light of 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. Are we well pleased in our weaknesses? Are we well pleased when others insult us? Are we well pleased in necessities (needs like clothing, hunger, thirst)? Are we well pleased when others persecute us or cause us distress on behalf of Christ? I repent for my dislike of being weak due to my flesh, self, natural man, the world and Satan operating within and around me. I especially do not like being insulted or misunderstood. The thought of suffering brutal attacks from others almost paralyzes me. In each of these things, I must confess to the Lord that I fall short of His glory and am still trying to live according to the flesh, the self, the natural man, and even the world and Satan rather than denying myself, taking up the cross and following Him (Matthew 16:24). The Lord convicted me of my greediness (which is a form of idolatry - Ephesians 5:5) when I considered not having a job (being unemployed) and the Lord was prompting me to give money to a needy family. This is how detailed the Lord's light becomes in us when we touch the living and operative word of God.

### **His Life/Love Versus Ours**

The following hymn gives another wonderful example of the believer's paradox:

*I love my Lord, but with no love of mine for I have none to give;*

*I love Thee, Lord, but all the love is Thine for by Thy love I live.  
I am as nothing, and rejoice to be emptied, and lost, and swallowed up in Thee.*

The love of Christ in our flesh, our soul life, our natural man, the world or Satan is not acceptable to God. But when we experience the cross through faith, we have Christ's love. We have a form of love towards the Lord in our old man, but the only kind of love that the Lord accepts is the love that comes from Christ out of death and resurrection. We are alive as human beings, but we must learn to live by the love of Christ. Christ desires us to be His sons, yet we must become as nothing (Galatians 6:3), poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3)! Christ took the lead to model how to do this by emptying Himself and taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6). Likewise, we must be emptied of flesh, self, natural man, world and Satan, even swallowed up in Christ so that we become identified with Him!

## In Conclusion

I hope the matter of the Believer's Paradox will help you in your walk with the Lord just as it has helped me. It has "**fanned into flame**" (2 Timothy 1:6) a fresh appreciation and motivation to spend time with the Lord in His written word, in prayer, and in meditation of His Word spoken into my heart directly. It has also strengthened my search for true fellowship with other saints, especially my wife, my children, and saints the Lord has placed in my life. True fellowship brings us into the light, allows the Lord's life and word to operate effectively, and exposes any and all areas that hinder our love towards Him and our walk with Him.

We should always be asking the Lord if we are hearing and obeying Him or whether our hearts are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. We should always allow the Lord through His word to go deeper to expose the roots of darkness within us so we can deal with them and then we can enter into the positive things of the Lord without hindrance. This is a painful process, like the discipline of a father to his child (Hebrews 12:5-11), but it is necessary and brings the fruit of righteousness. God's part in our salvation is secure and trustworthy. He will save our souls. He will transform us and conform us into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). The real issue lies with us and in working out our own salvation (Philippians 2:12):

**The Lord does not delay regarding the promise as some count delay, but is longsuffering toward you, not intending that any perish but that all advance to repentance.** (2 Peter 3:9)

**Struggle to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will seek to enter, yet will not be able. Once the Master of the house has risen and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, "Lord, open to us, then He will answer and say to you, I do not know you, nor where you are from. Then you will begin to say, We ate in Your presence and drank, and You taught in our streets. And He will say, I tell you, I do not know where**

**you are from. Go away from Me, all you workers of unrighteousness.** (Luke 13:24-27)

**Exhort one another each day, as long as it is called 'today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.** (Hebrews 3:13)